

## Who Pooped? A Saga of Liars

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### *Who Pooped?*

It doesn't get much worse than waking up at a quarter past seven every morning to the sounds of screaming children for eight weeks straight on your summer vacation. The only thing that could make me regret my already small paycheck even more is waking up to the campers clamoring that there are actual feces festering in the cabin.

"What?" was the only word I could muster after I opened the door to young Eli after scrambling out of bed following five hours of sleep, a rest that was pushed back due to a 2-hour-long late-night staff meeting about the placement of the counselor-only coffee machine in the mess hall and its proximity to campers, an issue that was only brought to surface because hot cocoa packets kept getting stolen.

I opened my door to Eli, a young boy with a chip on his shoulder and his heart on his sleeve (also with a chocolate stain on his lips, something I couldn't be bothered asking him about because I knew he would just tell me he had nothing to do with the clearly stolen powdered confection), who alerted me of the poop in the cabin, and that all his cabinmates had planned to move out and camp the rest of the session in "Funkytown," the ironically-named roofed outdoor pavilion decorated with the names of camp's many gracious patrons.

I was not as impressed as I should've been that my eight-year-old campers had successfully mobilized their 75-pound luggage in the rain, as I was more focused on the poop in the cabin. After the traumatizing cleaning saga had ended, my co-staff and I individually asked our campers who did it. To absolutely no one's surprise, none of the campers fessed up, something that, honestly, I can understand. No one wants to be the cabin pooper. Here's the thing: we as staff are trained specifically for situations like these, making sure that campers feel safe and trust their staff with potentially embarrassing conversations, because we aren't here to punish them, but to help them. We even make sure we tell them specifically, to ease their worries, that they will not get in trouble no matter what. Even though we tried our best to make this situation as safe as possible, we were still being lied to, straight to our faces. But being lied to was not a particularly new problem for these kids (which is also why I didn't bother asking Eli about his lips); often, we would watch them actively do something they knew they would get in trouble for doing, but confidently deny when confronted.

This prevalent issue in children, consistent, pathological lying, continues outside the bounds of overnight camp and into the family home, with Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., writer and clinical

psychologist, stating that 96% of young children lie to their parents. I personally can relate; there are many things that I hid from my parents when I was younger. However, what I am more concerned about is why, even though their parents weren't around, the campers felt the need to continue to lie to us? Ultimately, the issue of children lying at camp is a problem that must be addressed from multiple angles before we identify a culprit.

### ***Lying Lies Deep***

Parents often jump the gun and fail to see the intrinsic causes of children lying. Writer Beth Arky, paired alongside clinical expert Matthew Rouse Ph.D., writing for the Child Mind Institute, marks that the assumption commonly made by parents is that children lie only to delay punishment, consequences, or to get out of something that they generally don't want to do. They say that although these are *some* common causes, they are mainly situational. There are much more significant reasons why, revealing underlying, deeply embedded psychological motivations. Some might include wanting to test out new behaviors. Arky and Rouse note that when kids initially discover lying, they want to see how far it can go, to test the extent of their newfound knowledge. Another reason is to enhance self-esteem and approval, like that one kid in elementary school who would claim to live in a 30-million-dollar mansion and own pet elephants. According to Arky, that child might lack confidence, which then as a result causes them to make grandiose lies. To Arky and Rouse, the prominent causes of kids lying are rooted in their psyche.

Rouse, while explaining how to combat lies when confronted with them, says there are three levels of lies when they come from children. The first level is the type that only serves to validate an attention deficit for the child. This can be making something up randomly to make themselves perceived as cooler or more interesting to the person they told it to. These lies aren't going to hurt anyone, but are still a bad habit, so it's best to ignore them. The next level is shifting to a story that may have happened but is changed to fit an ideal reality. The right way to confront a child's misconstruing something is by acknowledging the lie outright and guiding them to tell the true story. The third level of lie, as mentioned before as the underlying assumption, occurs when a child is confronted with some type of consequence, and will say whatever it takes to not receive that outcome.

None of these levels of lies, however, explain the front put up by my campers to defend who laid the mess in the cabin. I believe these weren't first level lies because nothing was *made up* necessarily, besides the fact that none of them did it, but it also doesn't lead me to believe any of them are cooler or more interesting had they not done it. We can scratch level-one lies off our list of possibilities as to why my campers lied. They aren't the second level, either. None of the campers gave me a scenario in which the event *may* have happened but changed to make it so that it didn't. Level two lies are crossed out then. Then it must be the third level of lie, right?

I'd say no. Remember before when I mentioned that we as staff preface these potentially embarrassing conversations with the condition that if our campers tell us the truth, they wouldn't get in trouble? If that's the case, then they should not have been afraid of any kind of consequence. That checks the final level off the list. If Arky and Rouse's conditions weren't met, then there must be another reason, a reason not yet approached by modern developmental psychology that shows why in this scenario my campers lied to me.

### ***ADHD: A Diagnosis Hastily Delivered***

The truth is, intrinsic reasons for children lying, although they're necessary to note, do not reveal the full picture of why accountability falls short at summer camp or tell me why my campers kept lying to me. My co-staff and I considered a possibility in which ADHD might be involved. In a process referred to as "bunking," co-staff get together before a camp session begins to look at a camper's files. These files include everything that is needed for staff to have a successful summer with them. Topics cover allergies, prescriptions, birthdays, and even sensitive conversation points. One thing the other staff and I have noticed as we receive more and more files is the increase in diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and the prescription of Adderall. According to ABC News reporting in 2024, one in nine children aged 3-17 in the US have been diagnosed with ADHD. In my experience in the cabin, the number of ADHD diagnoses increases to around one third. This uptick in statistics at camp makes me wonder if there is a relationship between ADHD and lying.

Before we answer that question, I believe it's worth noting what ADHD means and what the trends of increasing diagnoses in the US means. According to the National Institute of Health, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder often characterized by moderate-to-extreme forms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Notable characteristics of ADHD include pervasiveness both situationally and developmentally. This means that ADHD symptoms can occur anywhere from home, school, or any other activities, and often carry over from childhood into adulthood. Several harmful impacts arise from ADHD: Relationships, academic/professional success, and executive functioning are all victims to this neurological disorder. ADHD is often diagnosed as a comorbidity of depression and anxiety, and nearly 50% of people with ADHD also have some form of Generalized Anxiety Disorder, a condition that impacts 11% of the US population. For reference, most if not all parents of my campers note in their files that they would label their kid as "anxious/anxiety prone." In previous generations, Brian Kavanaugh, PsyD states, ADHD diagnoses at these rates were not possible. He blames a couple of things, but most notably and in most depth explains that the definitions of these conditions are the main cause for the exponential increase of ADHD cases. He further elaborates that the diagnosis today would be associated with mere inattentiveness rather than a full-blown neurological disorder. He further argues that alongside the broadening

of American healthcare coverage, this increase in diagnoses is good because more people can get treated.

This line of thinking is exactly why the expansion of the definition of ADHD is a huge problem. We look to Elizabeth Wolf, MPH, who expands on the ideas of Kavanaugh, but claims that there is an ADHD overdiagnosis pandemic in the US. While it's true that it's good that the definition of ADHD has expanded since its beginnings, causing higher treatment rates for kids who need it, Wolf explains that there are factors to consider that show that doctors have taken their diagnoses too far. Factors that play into this include comparing children to how they should act for their grade level and even race (Wolf). When children in the US are over-diagnosed, more children than necessary receive treatment. Even though we as staff get brownie points from our boss when all our kids take their meds on time, it doesn't negate the fact that when children receive medication like methylphenidate or other amphetamines for their ADHD that doesn't exist, they experience adverse side effects like emotional detachment, irritability, or obsessive behaviors. All of these are behaviors that I personally witnessed in the cabin on a day-to-day basis, and according to Hal Shorey, Ph.D. and Jenni Jacobsen, Ph.D., are all traits that lead to increased levels of lying.

This conclusion may seem like a bit of a stretch, and you're right; it is. Whether or not there is enough evidence to conclude that the overdiagnosis of ADHD in America contributes to a generation of liars isn't just up for debate but likely requires much more research than my cross-reference inferences. However, even if you disregard my previous assertion, ADHD in this case is a double-edged sword. We turn back to Arky and Rouse from before, who initially couldn't tell us why my campers lied to me. They point to Carol Brady, clinical psychologist and specialist of children with ADHD, who explains that ADHD itself without the misdiagnosis is enough to harbor more lies in children. She claims that children with ADHD might lie purely out of impulse. Some ADHD-based lies might be accidental, and that they might not tell the truth because they forgot what really happened. Could it be possible that one of my ADHD campers had an accident on the floor in the middle of the night and forgot about it?

Even when we consider both sides of this ADHD coin, the side that points to more lies from overdiagnosis, and the side that says there are more lies from ADHD itself, it doesn't account for all my campers. I refuse to cloud my judgement and blame an issue that may only affect up to a third of the cabin. There must be *something* that can explain the hellish nightmare me and my co-staff went through that morning, something that can peel back the lies and unveil the truth.

### ***Lord of the Lies***

The overnight camp social structure is exceptionally isolated from the outside world. The drastic difference between what happens inside of select overnight camps versus what's happening in

the rest of the world is uncanny. I could be painted head-to-toe in green body paint to fit my team's theme for an ultimate frisbee game, and just hours later, once I left for my day off, go to the bank to finalize my checking account. The two are completely polarized. In fact, it's meant to be like that. Originally, according to Natalia Petrzela writing for History.com, summer camps were invented to change the scenery for young boys living in the realm of an industrialized cityscape in the mid-1800s, a change including days of constant play, guises of independence, and team-building, labor-based exercises. This structure matches the overnight camp archetype today, although most camps have opted for co-ed populations. Besides the intertwine of the sexes at summer camps, the structure stays congruent.

*Lord of the Flies*, a dystopian novel by William Golding about British schoolboys becoming stranded on a vacant island is a natural comparison for summer camps. Golding's story says that isolated societies that are left to their own devices with no authoritative figure will erupt into unstructured violence and savagery. Then, according to Golding, the same thing should happen if you put twelve young children in a cabin, uninhibited besides the daily camp schedule, and the upper-middle-class boys potty-trained with bidets will turn the cabin into a tumultuous hellhole while the staff are asleep. But, when we turn to a study conducted by *Frontiers in Psychology*, camp settings like these foster empathy and optimism in as few as two weeks.

The thing is, however, that these traits that would have saved the kids on Golding's island actually turn children into better liars through increased social awareness and deception. Christian Hart, Ph.D., states that bolstering traits like empathy increase the chances of that person to lie. He explains that a good liar deceives and provides false fronts, and that there is no better way to do this than to deeply understand the person they are trying to hoodwink. Therefore, a trait seemingly benevolent as empathy is actually a refinery for lying and thereby a medium. Furthermore, Golding, then, might not be entirely wrong, because camp isolation reshapes misbehavior instead of erasing it. Rather than children reverting to savagery, children in the cabin turn to strategy. Making campers empathetic through camp activities increases their lying skills, which increases both the success rate of their lies and the amount they tell. My campers didn't lie because they feared fessing up; it's because we taught them that if they did, we would redefine their identity over what may have been a lapse of judgement.

### ***Who Pooped: A Cold Case***

After about an hour of collective denial, the campers decided together that the poop in the cabin was the fault of the Art Director's service dog, a hypothesis I only believed for half a second until realizing Raffa doesn't have the appposable thumbs that would be necessary to open the front door. The denial perpetuated by the campers that co-staff and I received led us to infer many different causes to the bombardment of false fronts. But what we learned today is that the main culprit isn't human nature; the situation we faced proved to be too complex for

the developmental psychology textbook. It also wasn't ADHD, because we can't let a misrepresented minority cloud our beliefs. The real cause all along was the social structure we subject our campers to, and how teaching them to be good little empathetic boys encouraged them to trick us better.

At the end of the day, the poop is gone, but what was left was something much more concerning. It turned out that the primary cause for my kids lying at camp in my circumstance wasn't because they had done it their whole upbringing, but because we as staff reinforced behaviors they may have been wanting to try out and accidentally made them professionals through the cultivation of empathy. I no longer work at summer camps, but their structure will likely sustain as-is, as has been the case since the mid-1800s. Summer camps will continue to raise children in isolated environments where parents believe their young are becoming more independent, which may be true, but ultimately become bigger problems coming home than when they had left. The cycle continues when parents blame this behavior on the children and continue to support a rehabilitation-guised summer getaway when the problem had been the institution the whole time.

So, who pooped? To this day we'll never know. But hopefully next time something as grossly surreal as that happens again, we think twice before considering blaming the dog.

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